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“Patriotic” Traitors: Dutch National Socialists In Peace and War



by Gerlof D. Homan

Although World War II ended some forty-five years ago, various war-time experiences are still very painful and delicate today. Among them is what the Dutch have traditionally called the “foute sector.” That is, those individuals who for ideological reasons sided with the enemy during the war and supported or were members of various National Socialist organizations.

Dutch National Socialism was not an isolated phenomenon but was part of a larger European movement that started in the 1920s in Italy, when

Mussolini launched his fascist movement. In Germany it was known as the German National Socialist Workers of Nazi Party for short. In the 1920s in The Netherlands we had a large number of such fascist groups. But it was not until the 1930s that a right-wing, authoritarian political party made a splash on the Dutch political landscape. This was the Nationaal Socialistische Beweging, National Socialist Movement, hereafter referred to by its Dutch initials, NSB. It was organized in December 1931 and modeled after the German Nazi party. Initially, its ideology was rather vague, but it championed the leadership principle instead of parliamentary democracy, and rejected capitalism.

In the 1930s the NSB was not anti-semitic, and for some time even had a small number of Jewish members.¹ In the early 1930s the NSB had some 1,000 members but in 1935 counted 36,000. In that year the party decided to participate in provincial elections, and much to everyone's surprise, received almost 8 percent of the electoral vote. Especially in the Provinces of Drenthe and Limburg the NSB received many votes. In sixty-one *gemeenten* or counties it even received more than 15 percent and in one *gemeente* more the 38 percent of the popular vote. No other new party had ever scored so well in such a short period of time.²

This electoral success reflected the economic and political malaise of the time. The Netherlands was very much affected by the world-wide economic depression, and it took a few years before the Dutch political and economic system was able to cope with the problems of unemployment and overproduction. But the NSB never became a mass movement supported by the lower, working class and the

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unemployed. The NSB seemed to have drawn much support from lower middle class citizens and small farmers who probably felt threatened by the economic uncertainties and social changes of the 1930s.

Many also voted for the NSB because of their frustration with the Dutch democratic and electoral process which had spawned fifty-four parties in 1933, none of which seemed capable of coping with the important questions of the day. The NSB had always been a vociferous critic of democracy and the existing political parties and promised unity. But the new party also received support from individuals who tended to vote for right-wing parties. Many were also attracted by the NSB because it promised to bring about some kind of national renewal and to be a party of deeds and action. Finally, many supported the party because of its good organization.³

The organization of the NSB was to a very large extent the work of its leader, Anton A. Mussert. Mussert was a very competent civil engineer who had made a name for himself in the 1920s when he organized successful opposition to a Dutch-Belgian treaty which he and many others considered detrimental to Netherlands' interest. But Mussert had political ambitions. In 1931 he founded the NSB and in the years following, in spite of many ups and downs, remained the embodiment of the party.

In many respects Mussert did not seem to be the ideal leader. He was not a person of considerable intellect of political ability. He did not have a charismatic personality and displayed little understanding of the demonic nature of German National Socialism. He was also a poor speaker and seemed awkward and ill at ease among people. He was probably, compared with many other National Socialists in and outside Germany, not a very evil person. But in time most Netherlands came to view him as the personification of *landverraad* or treason.⁴

However, the NSB did not fare well in the elections of 1937 and 1939, and its membership declined from 52,000 to 32,000. This decline was the result of public concern over the increasing radicalism and para-military character of the party, which came more and more under German National Socialist influence. The unemployment problem also became less acute while various groups such as the Synod of the *Gereformeerde Kerk* (Christian Reformed Church), the Roman Catholic Church, and left-wing

parties spoke up against the NSB. Finally, NSB support for Mussolini and Hitler's dangerous foreign policy and military aggression disenchanted many former supporters. Thus, at the time of the outbreak of the war the NSB was an isolated and ostracized party.⁵

On May 10, 1940, Hitler's armies attacked The Netherlands and in a few days overwhelmed the small Dutch armed forces. During this brief struggle and afterwards, most Dutch citizens firmly believed the NSB had actively aided the German invader. Although this suspicion is understandable, no evidence has ever been uncovered to prove such allegations. The NSB could rightly be accused of

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a variety of war-time crimes, but it did not commit treason in May 1940.⁶

Before May 1940 Mussert had not been able to attain political power through the democratic, electoral process. During the war only Hitler could appoint him to a position of leadership. But much to Mussert's chagrin Hitler refused to call upon the Dutch National Socialists to lead the nation and installed the Austrian Nazi Arthur Seyss-Inquart as the *Reichscommissar* or State Commissioner of occupied Netherlands. Hitler might have been influenced in this decision by his experiences of the Norwegian Nazi Vidkun Quisling who in April 1940 had failed to stay in power. Furthermore, the German National Socialist leadership did not think much of Mussert and the NSB, which they did not consider radical enough. Thus Mussert was shunted aside and for years kept waiting in the wings for a call that never came, even after he swore loyalty to Hitler in December 1941.

During the first few years of the occupation, Mussert's party grew. While it had only about 32,000 members in 1940, three years later the total membership was about 100,000, a following not unusually large compared with other West European nations such as Norway and Denmark.⁷ Many of the new members joined for opportunistic reasons, hoping the NSB would enable them to improve their station in life, while others accommodated themselves to the apparently victorious New Order.

In spite of rebuffs and humiliations, Mussert continued to hope he would be appointed head of a Dutch government. In August and September of 1940, Seyss-Inquart agreed he would use Mussert if the latter agreed to exclude Jews from the NSB, would recognize Hitler's leadership, and would accept other demands, Mussert agreed, and in December 1941 even took an oath of loyalty to Hitler. But the latter made few concessions. He agreed only to ban all Dutch parties but the NSB, and recognized Mussert as head of the Dutch people. But this title granted him no powers or prerogatives.⁸

During the occupation various disagreements arose between Mussert and the German authorities. One dispute concerned the future status of The Netherlands. Mussert hoped The Netherlands would retain her identity in the New Europe and be permitted to establish a Greater Netherlands state, also called Dietsland, to include Flanders. This Dietsland was to become part of a league of Germanic peoples led by Germany. But Hitler wanted The Netherlands, like Austria, to be incorporated into a greater Germany.⁹

Privately and even publicly Mussert expressed his disappointment over some of the occupation policies, and in 1943 even feared he might be arrested and dispatched to a German concentration camp. In fact, he boasted once that the NSB constituted the best resistance against the Germans. However, he could never point to any successful NSB opposition to German policies.

In spite of various disagreements with the occupation authorities, Mussert and most NSB-ers supported or simply acquiesced in various hardships imposed on the Dutch population. Thus they supported Hitler's military ventures, deportation of Dutch Jews, and compulsory labor service. Many NSB-ers were appointed to public positions, especially as mayors, and betrayed fellow citizens. Mussert's party also received very generous subsidies from the occupation regime, which had obtained such funds from the Dutch taxpayer.

Finally, the NSB was responsible for establishing the notorious *Landwacht*, a police corps designed to protect its members against the resistance, which killed some eighty NSB-ers during the war. But the *Landwacht* soon became a tool of the occupation authorities. It was especially active in rounding up members of the resistance, Jews, citizens who re-

fused to perform compulsory labor service in Germany and other so-called *onderduikers*—those who had "dived under" or gone into hiding. The *Landwacht* consisted mostly of riffraff but often did its work very well and terrorized the population.¹⁰

The NSB also assisted with recruiting men for the German armed forces. Perhaps the total number that served under the auspices of the Waffen SS was between 23,000 and 25,000, of whom about 17,000 to 20,000 fought at the Eastern Front, where some 7,000 were killed. About 50 percent of those who served were NSB-ers.¹¹

Thus during the entire occupation period, the NSB became an isolated and hated minority, despised even more than the German oppressor. Yet, there were many harmless NSB-ers who did not betray fellow citizens and who felt embarrassed over many occupation policies. Why did they not resign from the party? Perhaps they felt trapped and they compromised. After the war they would suffer with those who had been guilty of serious offenses.

The last year of the war became a disaster for the NSB. The rank and file as well as the leadership were demoralized. Especially the events of *Dolle Dinsdag*, or Mad Tuesday, September 4, 1944, devastated the NSB. Before, during, and after that day some 65,000 NSB-ers, fearing the imminent collapse of the occupation regime, fled to Germany, where they were not always received with open arms. The end came in May 1945 when thousands of NSB-ers were arrested and interned.¹² At that time many of their comrades in the southern part of the country had already been imprisoned since the fall of 1944.

After the war some 150,000 Dutch citizens, of whom 90,000 were NSB-ers, were arrested and interned. Often before and during their arrest they were tarred, beaten, or otherwise humiliated. Still their lot was better than the war-time promise or threat of a *bijltjesdag*, a hatchet day, a time of summary justice. However, there were not enough facilities and competent personnel to house and guard the prisoners. As a result many abuses occurred, and in some camps conditions prevailed that reminded one of Nazi prisons. It has been estimated that between thirty and forty inmates were killed as a result of camp brutalities. Especially painful was the lot of some 24,000 NSB children who were separated from their parents and placed in special homes or cared for by neighbors or relatives. Until

this day we know little about these NSB children—how much they suffered and how long they have tried to hide a terribly painful past.¹³

Soon many NSB-ers were released, while about 64,000, including many non-NSB-ers and those who had served in German military units, were tried by special tribunals and courts. Among those tried was Mussert, who attempted to defend himself by contending that he, as a good patriot, had tried to defend the integrity of his country against great odds. It was all in vain. The court found him guilty and he was sentenced to death. Before the war the death penalty had been abolished in The Netherlands, but the government in exile reinstated it, and Mussert was executed in May 1946. Many more were sentenced to death, but only forty of those were executed. Not all of those were NSB-ers; many were other traitors and five Germans. Of those imprisoned, all were released by 1964, except four Germans, of whom the last two were finally released in 1988.¹⁴

Had justice been done? Many NSB-ers and other citizens deserved some kind of punishment. However, many other citizens who collaborated much more with the enemy than many a Dutch National Socialist were not punished. Among them were many members of the civil service and the police. Nor were many punished for their economic collaboration. But in the post-war era such collaboration, which was often done out of fear, ignorance, or greed, was, rightly or wrongly, more readily forgiven than NSB or ideological support for the enemy.

After the war very few NSB-ers expressed regret for their war-time behavior. They would often compare their collaboration with that of non-NSB-ers who had not been punished, and later, with the onset of the Cold War, argued they had been right in their decision to support Hitler in his struggle against Communism. But the post-war era has not seen the kind of revisionism they might have hoped for. What was *fout* in World War II is still *fout* [wrong] today. Unfortunately, the post-war attitude of many former NSB-ers and the unforgiving sentiment of the rest of the population made national reconciliation very difficult.

Perhaps Mussert and some of his cohorts were patriots of sorts who thought they knew what was best for their countrymen and tried to preserve a small place for The Netherlands in a New Europe dominated by Hitler's National Socialism. But the

NSB had its own interpretation of patriotism. To them it meant loyalty to a Dutch nation based upon the principles of National Socialism. That kind of nation most Netherlands did not want in the 1930s and 1940s and do not prefer today.

NOTES

- 1 On the early Dutch fascist groups of the 1920s and the beginnings of the NSB see A.A. de Jonge, *Het Nationaal Socialisme in Nederland* (The Hague, 1968) passim; I. Schiffer, *Het Nationaal Socialistische beeld van de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (Arnhem, 1956) passim.
- 2 On the electoral behavior of the NSB see especially G.A. Kooy, *Het echec van een volkse beweging* (Assen, 1964) passim and H.W. von der Dunk, ed., *In de schaduw van de depressie* (Alphen aan de Rijn, 1982).
- 3 Gerhard Hirschfeld, *Nazi Rule and Dutch Collaboration, 1940-1945*, transl., Louise Willmot (New York, 1988) 257. This is the best current work in the English language on The Netherlands in the Second World War. Another, older work is Werner Warmbrunn, *The Dutch Under German Occupation, 1940-1945* (Stanford, Cal., 1963).
- 4 On Mussert see R. Havenaar, *Verrader voor het vaderland. Een biografische schets van Adriaan Anton Mussert* (The Hague, 1978) and Jan Meyers, *Mussert, een politiek leven* (Amsterdam, 1984).
- 5 De Jonge, *Nationaal Socialisme*, 102ff; Kooy, *Echec*, 342.
- 6 L. de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, 13 vols. (The Hague, 1969-1988) 2: 261ff. This is the standard work on The Netherlands during the Second World War.
- 7 Kooy, *Echec*, 346; David Littlejohn, *The Patriotic Traitors: A History of Collaboration in German-Occupied Europe, 1940-1945* (London, 1972), 19-20, 71; Malene Djursaa, "Who Were the Danish Nazis? A Methodological Report. An Ongoing Project" in Reinhard Mann, ed., *Die nationalsozialisten: Analysen faschistischen Bewegungen* (Stuttgart, 1980) 138.
- 8 De Jong, *Koninkrijk*, 4 passim; Havenaar, *Mussert*, 74 ff.
- 9 On Mussert's plan for a post-war Europe see his *Vijf nota's van Mussert aan Hitler* . . . (The Hague, 1947).
- 10 On the NSB during the war see De Jong, *Koninkrijk*, 5,6,7, passim; Havenaar, *Mussert*, passim and Meyers, *Mussert*, passim.
- 11 On the Dutch citizens serving in the German armed forces during World War II see Sytze van der Zee, *Voor Fuehrer, Volk en Vaderland sneuvelde . . . De SS in Nederland. Nederland in de SS* (The Hague, 1975) passim and N.K.C.A. in 't Veld, ed., *De SS in Nederland In Nederland. Documenten uit SS archieve, 1935-1945* (The Hague, 1975) passim.
- 12 De Jong, *Koninkrijk*, 10: 175ff.
- 13 On post-war justice for NSB-ers and other collaborators see S. Belinfante, *In plaats van bijltjesdag: De geschiedenis van de bijzondere gerechtspleging na de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Assen, 1978) and Koos Groen, (Weesp, 1984). Very little has been written by ex-NSB-ers or their children but see Catharina Gosewins, *Een licht geval* (Amsterdam, 1980) and P. Beserk, *De tweede generatie: Herinneringen van een NSB kind* (Utrecht, 1985).
- 14 De Jong, *Koninkrijk*, 12: 529ff.